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ABSTRACT

An evaluation of compositions written by 375 disadvantaged high school sophomores from New York City showed that these students achieved Picture Story Language Test (PSLT) scores which were higher in productivity, lower on syntax quotient, and approximately equivalent on the abstract-concrete dimension, as compared with the population upon which the PSLT had been standardized. These disadvantaged students were part of the College Discovery and Development Program (CDDP). The appropriateness of the PLST norms for the CDDP population is problematical as the control sample was representational of 125 urban and suburban and middle-class and lower-class high school students, while the CDDP group were urban, impoverished, and primarily minority group students. However, the CDDP scores should be helpful to English teachers for diagnostic and corrective measures. (KG)

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AN EVALUATION OF THE WRITTEN COMPOSITION OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN FIVE COLLEGE DISCOVERY CENTERS IN NEW YORK CITY

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An Evaluation of the Written Composition of High School Students in Five College Discovery Centers in New York City

It has been stated that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds come to school with many language disabilities already present. They are not non-verbal but their oral language patterns, according to Bernstein[1], are restricted and define the limits of future learning. Bernstein finds that often not enough elaborate language is present for precise conceptualizing. Middle class children, on the other hand, are considered to have developed elaborate communication codes early. They are assured to be capable, because of this, of bridging the gap easily between home and school.

What relation does this have to the ability to communicate by means of the written symbol? While there seems to be a great deal of information on the achievement of disadvantaged populations in the

language arts areas of speech, reading or listening, there are few reports in the literature concerning their written expression. When there have been studies concerned with composition or grammar, the subjects have been those disadvantaged students considered to be illiterate in all communication areas. Furthermore, even in schools where school populations showed great need for help in written work, the National Council of Teachers of English Task Force on Teaching English to the Disadvantaged found that "few schools had any sequential plan for the teaching of writing." Most school programs, they found, relied on the correction of individual assignments but had no definite plan that attacked the specific writing problems. On the other hand, they found formal grammar being taught in many schools[2].

Loban found in his research in Oakland, California schools that subjects from the lower socio-economic groups do not use language with as full a range of potential as those from more favored groups." His study was concerned with oral language and he defines "full potential" as the use of such syntactical devices as coordination or subordination to express a complex idea or using an appositive to reinforce or to extend the listener's understanding of what is being communicated.[3] He further states that the Negro children he studied were hampered by the use of a "social dialect." They needed, he concluded, help in areas of usage, verb-subject agreement in third person singular, use of auxiliary verbs, with the use of omitted words and word endings and beginnings, with noun forms, and with double negatives. The proper use of the verb "to be," was considered to be their greatest problem.

Loban states also[3] that "people who live in lower socio-economic disadvantaged groups use language primarily for immediate concrete situations." He also says that "they do not use language to examine the future" nor "to go back to reexamine the past to see what lessons might be learned." And Loban found that such "people" use short, brief sentences or partial sentences and are "not in the habit of expressing subjective emotions and feelings."

Purpose of Study

This is the first repo. of several reports dealing with the written composition of a group of 375 underprivileged high school sophomores in five high schools in New York City.

The aims of the first study were:

1. to determine the level of performance in written composition of these high school students by comparing their performances with those of the normative population on the Myklebust Picture Story Language Test.
2. To compare the scores of each student on the three aspects of composition measured by the Myklebust Picture Story Language Test: Productivity, Syntax, and Abstract-Concrete Level.
3. to compare the level of performance of this group of students on the three aspects of composition measured by the Myklebust Picture Story Language Test with their performances on the reading comprehension section of the Stanford Achievement Test-High School Battery (Grades 9-12).

Further studies are in the process of:

1. analyzing the relationships among the various aspects of the Myklebust test and other measures of aptitude and achievement and
2. ascertaining which themes such students would choose for composition-writing, given the Myklebust picture as a stimulus.*

A final aim of this study was to provide information for the development of both composition and literature units by English teachers in the City University-New York City Board of Education College Discovery and Development Program based on the diagnostic results and the evaluation of themes chosen.

Description of Population

The College Discovery and Development Program, of which the students tested were a part, is a joint project of the New York City Board of Education and The City University of New York, inaugurated in 1965. Its purpose, so far as its student clientele is concerned, is to identify economically disadvantaged children who have demonstrated academic potential rather than achievement and who, therefore, are underachievers at Ninth Grade. The program seeks to raise their motivation for and expectation of college study, while improving their high school achievement and preparation for later college success. Its other purposes include a longitudinal study of economically disadvantaged youth with

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* This is reported in an article by Ruth R. Adams of City College and Florence B. Freedman of Hunter College: The Themes They Choose (in press).

academic potential in order to improve methods of identification of such students and prognosis of their possible achievement on the college level, and ultimately, of modifying teaching patterns for such children.

Students are nominated by Ninth Grade counselors, by community action programs, and by social agencies. Nominations are reviewed by a panel of high school and college staff.

Those students selected (about 550 per year during the first two years) are enrolled in five College Development Centers, one in each borough of the City of New York. Special features of the program are small classes (15-20), double periods in basic subjects, college students as tutor-mentors, augmented guidance services (one counselor per hundred students), a weekly scholarship-stipend, and opportunities for cultural enrichment through trips, including visits to college campuses. College professors serve as consultants to the teachers, since the curriculum follows the typical high school pattern, but uses approaches, methods, and materials especially selected or adapted to these students to enable them to meet the objectives and standards of the regular academic course.

In the field of English, teachers and chairmen as well as college consultants found that most of these students read well and enthusiastically books, both standard and contemporary which were relevant to their concerns, not just in similarity of setting, but in larger elements of character and problems.* Those whose reading had been

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* Reading scores of entering tenth graders ranged from 4.6 to 12.8 with a mean score of 10.357 on the Metropolitan Achievement tests administered in the spring of the 9th grade. On the Stanford Achievement Reading test given in the fall by the high schools the range was from the 1st percentile to the 94th percentile with a mean percentile of 32.801.

below level improved markedly during the program. The area of greatest difficulty in the English curriculum for those College Discovery students proved to be in writing. The teachers, whose findings seemed to agree with Loban's, were concerned with matters of syntax and usage as well as with the content of their students' compositions.

The decision was made to diagnose the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing, to present each teacher with an analysis of the students' writing, to evaluate these students against national norms, and to use the findings as a basis for designing a curriculum in composition for the Eleventh Grade of this College Discovery Program.

The test administered was the Picture Story Language Test developed by Dr. Helmar H. Myklebust, Professor of Language Pathology and Psychology and Director of the Institute for Language Disorders of Northwestern University. The test measures three aspects of written language by means of a picture about which each student writes a story. The written sample of the individual student is judged on the basis of established norms in terms of (1) facility with the language or productivity, (2) correctness of language used, syntax, and (3) content or meaning, abstract-concrete level. Teachers are presented as a result of this test with an individual profile of each student, indicating the area of greatest weakness.

Although the author of the test feels that many factors such as organic disability may interfere with the normal development of written language, he states also that one factor may be cultural or educational deprivation and says that, "The Picture Story Language Test can be used to study the effects of cultural deprivation." Thus this test was

administered to the College Discovery 10th grade population described above because it was felt by their teachers that with these students achievement in written language was substantially lower than achievement in reading skills and other areas of the language arts. Clues were sought by which teachers could find the areas of individual need in written language of the students and help them to improve. The test was administered and scored by Professor Ruth Adams of the City College and Professor Florence B. Freedman of Hunter College. Professor Lawrence Brody, Director of the College Discovery and Development Program and his staff helped in planning the study and in writing this report.

Five hypotheses were defined for testing. These were:

1. No substantial differences in productivity scores will be found between the experimental population and the typical high school population upon which Picture Story Language Test norms were drawn.
2. No substantial differences in syntax scores will be found between the experimental population and the typical high school population upon which Picture Story Language Test norms were drawn.
3. No substantial differences in abstract-concrete scores will be found between the experimental population and the typical high school population upon which Picture Story Language Test norms were drawn.
4. There will be no substantial differences among the stanine

ranks of the experimental population on the three aspects of the Picture Story Language Test.

5. There will be no substantial differences between the stanine ranks of the experimental population on the Picture Story Language Test and the Stanford Achievement Test, High School Battery, Form W, (Grades 9-12), Test 4, Reading.

Results

Test	Boys		Girls	
	Mean	Stanine	Mean	Stanine
Total Words	161.24	6	193.29	7
Total Sentence	10.46	7	12.67	7
Word/Sentence	16.12	6	16.49	6
Syntax Quotient	96.34	4	98.05	4
Abstract-Concrete	18.00	5	18.37	4
SAT-Reading	32.39	4	32.29	4

The total number of students enrolled in the tenth grade of the College Discovery and Development Program at the time of testing was approximately 450.

Three hundred and seventy-five cases are included in the following discussion. This includes all cases for which complete data were available.

Hypothesis 1: It had been hypothecated that there would be no substantial differences in productivity measures between the experimental and the standardization populations. The Picture Story Language Test includes three sub-scores for productivity. It will be noted that stanine scores indicate that on all three productivity measures the experimental population achieved higher scores than the standardization population.

TABLE I

PSLT PRODUCTIVITY SCORES OF TENTH GRADE CDDP STUDENTS

Test	Boys		Girls	
	Mean	Stanine	Mean	Stanine
Total Words	161.24	6	193.29	7
Total Sentences	10.46	7	12.67	7
Words/sentence	16.12	6	16.49	6

This hypothesis was, therefore, not substantiated: the disadvantaged CDDP population achieved higher stanine scores than the normative population on all three productivity sub-measures.

Hypothesis II: It had been hypothecated that there would be no substantial differences in syntax scores between experimental and standard populations. The table shows stanine scores for the syntax quotient subtest of PSLT.

TABLE II

PSLT SYNTAX QUOTIENT SCORES OF TENTH GRADE CDDP STUDENTS

Test	Boys		Girls	
	Mean	Stanine	Mean	Stanine
Syntax Quotient	96.34	4	98.05	4

The experimental population's syntax quotient stanine was one below that of the normative population. The hypothesis was, therefore, unsubstantiated.

Hypothesis III: It had been hypothecated that no substantial differences in abstract-concrete scores on PSLT would be found between the experimental population and the typical high school population upon which the PSLT norms had been drawn. Table III displays stanine scores for the abstract-concrete subtests of PSLT.

TABLE III

PSLT ABSTRACT-CONCRETE SCORES OF TENTH GRADE CDDP STUDENTS

Test	Boys		Girls	
	Mean	Stanine	Mean	Stanine
Abstract-concrete	18.00	5	18.37	4

It can be seen that the abstract-concrete stanine for CDDP experimental population is one-half stanine below the normative population scores. This is not a substantial difference nor was the difference found significant. The hypothesis is to all practical purposes substantiated.

Hypothesis IV: It had been hypothecated that there would be no substantial differences among the stanine ranks achieved by the experimental population on the three major aspects of the PLST. Table IV summarizes the stanines on the three major aspects.

TABLE IV

Test	Boys Stanine	Girls Stanine
Productivity	6	7
Syntax Quotient	4	4
Abstract Concrete	5	4

There were substantial differences among stanines on the three aspects of the PSLT for the experimental population. It can be seen that the abstract-concrete score is close to the median normative stanine, that the syntax quotient stanine is slightly below that of the normative population, but that the productivity measures are substantially above median stanine for the normative population. Therefore, this hypothesis was not substantiated.

Hypothesis V: It had been hypothecated that there would be no substantial differences between the scores of the experimental population on the PSLT and their scores on the Stanford Achievement Test, High School Battery

(grades 9-12), test 4, Reading. Table V displays scores for the PSLT and the Stanford Achievement Test. It will be noted that the stanine on SAT Reading for the experimental population was 4, but an estimated stanine for total PSLT scores falls in the sixth stanine. Since there was a substantial difference between stanines on PSLT and High School Battery, with the PSLT scores of the CDLP students substantially higher than their SAT scores, this hypothesis was not substantiated.

TABLE V

COMPARISON OF SAT AND PSLT STANINE SCORES OF CDDP STUDENTS

Test	Boys	Girls
SAT Reading	4	4
PSLT Estimated total*	5	6

*Estimated by interpolation. No total score stanines calculated in standardization of the PSLT.

Thus, in summary, College Discovery and Development Program students achieved Picture Story Language Test scores which were higher in productivity, lower on syntax-quotient, and approximately equivalent on the abstract-concrete dimension, as compared with the population upon which the Picture Story Language Test had been standardized. In addition, CDDP students showed considerable variation in their achievement scores on the three major aspects of the Picture Story Language Test although it had been anticipated that such variation would not occur. Similarly, CDDP students achieved substantially higher scores on PSLT than on the Stanford English Reading subtest.

It should be noted that the experimental population consisted of urban high school students who had been selected for participation in the CDDP because they were economically impoverished, had high academic

potential but had demonstrated academic performance very substantially below their potential prior to their enrollment in this program. It had been the opinion of English teachers that CDDP students were seriously handicapped in English composition. Yet, on the Picture Story Language Test, CDDP students achieved substantially higher productivity scores and substantially equivalent abstract-concrete scores. These findings would seem to challenge this previously expressed general opinion of English teachers; only in the syntax area did the experimental population achieve lower than standard population scores.

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions from this data regarding the appropriateness or inappropriateness of the above-mentioned teacher assessments for several reasons. First, the appropriateness of the PSLT norms for the CDDP population cannot be evaluated. The PSLT norms (for the age groups tested in this study) are based upon 125 cases. This population was selected to include a representative sample of high school youth, including urban and suburban, typical and disadvantaged youth. The experimental population in this study, however, consisted entirely of urban, impoverished and predominantly minority group students. Of these 375 students approximately 47% were Negro, 25% Puerto Rican and 3% Oriental. It is not clear whether the normative population can be assumed to be adequately representative to justify conclusions regarding the relative achievement of this experimental population and a generalized high school population. It would seem probable that the standardization population includes far less than the 75% minority group sub-population of CDDP. In addition, all of the CDDP population are impoverished while only some unknown fraction of the normative population can be assumed to have been economically poor.

It should also be noted that this experimental population is exactly three times as large as the total sample of comparable age in the normative population. If the present investigators could resolve these questions concerning the representativeness of the normative sample positively, they would have to conclude that, in general, the CDDP population is somewhat

above the general population in composition skills as measured by the Picture Story Language Test. Since this question remains unresolved, it is recommended that alternative means of evaluating the level of English composition skills of CDDP students be considered. One such means, a study of the themes chosen by these students in writing for the Picture Story Language Test has been completed by Professors Ruth Adams and Florence Freedman.*

The Syntax Quotient Scores of this experimental population were one stanine below standard, with the mean for the total experimental group at 97.09 (as compared with a standard total mean of 97.9). McGrady referring to the Syntax Quotient, stated:[5]

> "However, its essence is that the subject's sample is compared with an ideal model of what should have been written for his intent ... The scoring sheet for this test allows the clinician ... to pinpoint specific patterns of grammatical and morphological error."

If the representativeness of the standard population can be assumed, this implies a potentially fruitful means of further examining the English composition needs of the CDDP population. Such ..."pinpointing of specific patterns of grammatical and morphological errors" would seem to provide a most valuable means for teachers to greatly improve their students' success in another communication. Investigations of this promising lead and its underlying questions are being pursued.

Alternative routes toward increased student success are also being followed. The themes written by the CDDP students and their scoring by PSLT techniques have been photocopied and used in conferences with the high school English teachers by the College Discovery and Development Program's curriculum consultants. This has already been found to be helpful in several ways pending resolution of the question of representativeness of the PSLT standards. Whether a student's score was above or below "norms" has been accepted by teachers as of less importance than

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* Ruth Adams and Florence Freedman. The Themes They Choose. (in press)

identifying his specific needs and devising ways of improving his competence to its maximum potential. This is a most valuable pattern of action; it averts the focussing of teachers' attention primarily upon those "below grade." Each student's need is approached whether above or below norm, at specifying points of need as identified in his own work sample in the process of PSLT scoring.

Similarly, although the median stanine score of CDDP students was slightly below standard on the Abstract-Concrete dimension, these statistics are less useful to the teachers than analysis of the kinds and levels of abstraction, generalization or concrete specificity of languages each student used in his PSLT work sample. Here again, powerful tools for the teacher's use can be provided; this is a second means by which this testing program is being used by the curriculum consultants in CDDP.

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